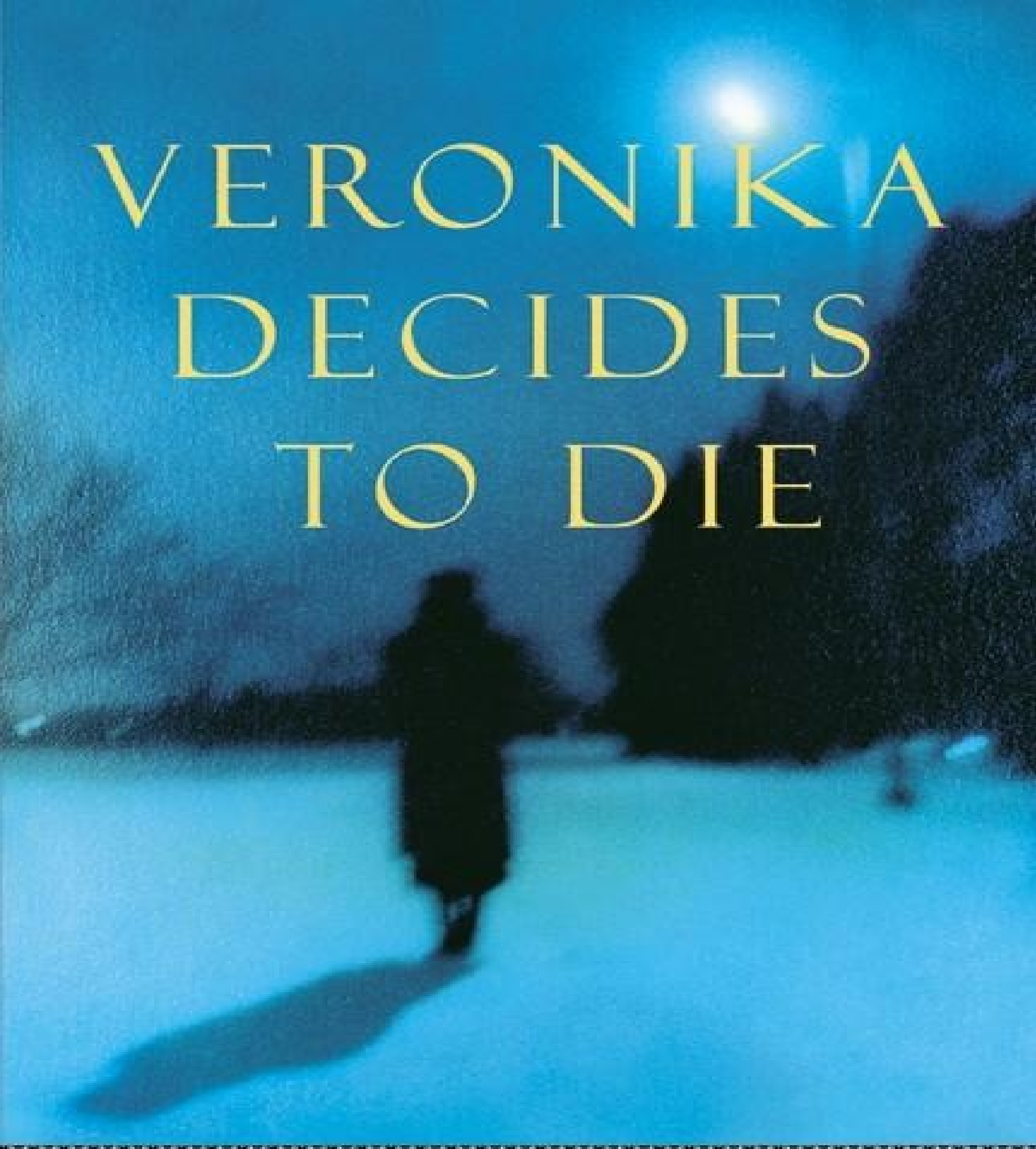

PAULO COELHO

AUTHOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER *THE ALCHEMIST*

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Veronika Decides to Die

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Veronika Decides to Die Coelho, Paulo

Behold I give unto you power to tread on serpents…and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Luke 10:19 For S.T. de L, who began to help me without my realising it.

On 11 November 1997, Veronika decided that the moment to kill herself had —at last!—arrived. She carefully cleaned the room that she rented in a convent, turned off the heating, brushed her teeth and lay down.

She picked up the four packs of sleeping pills from her bedside table. Instead of crushing them and mixing them with water, she decided to take them one by one, because there is always a gap between intention and action, and she wanted to feel free to turn back half way. However, with each pill she swallowed, she felt more convinced: after five minutes the packs were empty.

Since she didn't know exactly how long it would take her to lose consciousness, she had placed on the bed that month's issue of a French magazine,Homme , which had just arrived in the library where she worked. She had no particular interest in computer science, but, as she leafed through the magazine, she came across an article about a computer game (one of those CD-Roms), created by Paulo Coelho, a Brazilian writer she had happened to meet at a lecture in the caf? at the Grand Union Hotel. They had exchanged a few words and she had ended up being invited by his publisher to join them for supper.

There were a lot of people there, though, and they hadn't had a chance to talk in depth about anything.

The fact that she had met the author, however, led her to think that he was part of her world, and that reading an article about his work could help pass the time. While she was waiting for death, Veronika started reading about computer science, a subject in which she was not in the least bit interested, but then that was in keeping with what she had done all her life, always looking for the easy option, for whatever was nearest to hand. Like that magazine, for example.

To her surprise, though, the first line of text shook her out of her natural passivity (the tranquillizers had not yet dissolved in her stomach, but Veronika was, by nature, passive), and, for the first time in her life,

it made her ponder the truth of a saying that was very fashionable amongst her friends: 'nothing in this world happens by chance'.

Why that first line, at precisely the moment when she had begun to die?

What was the hidden message she saw before her, assuming there are such things as hidden messages rather than mere coincidences.

Underneath an illustration of the computer game, the journalist began his article by asking: ‘Where is Slovenia?’

‘Honestly,’she thought, ‘no one ever knows where Slovenia is.’

But Slovenia existed nonetheless, and it was outside, inside, in the mountains around her and in the square she was looking out at: Slovenia was her country.

She put the magazine to one side, there was no point now in getting indignant with a world that knew absolutely nothing about the Slovenes; her nation’s honour no longer concerned her. It was time to feel proud of herself, to recognise that she had been able to do this, that she had finally had the courage and was leaving this life: what joy! Also she was doing it as she had always dreamed she would—by taking sleeping pills, which leave no mark.

Veronika had been trying to get hold of the pills for nearly six months. Thinking that she would never manage it, she had even considered slashing her wrists. It didn’t matter that the room would end up awash with blood, and the nuns would be left feeling confused and troubled, for suicide demands that people think of themselves first and of others later. She was prepared to do all she could so that her death would cause as little upset as possible, but if slashing her wrists was the only way, then she had no option—and the nuns could clean up the room and quickly forget the whole story, otherwise they would find it hard to rent out the room again. We may live at the end of the twentieth century, but people still believe in ghosts.

Obviously she could have thrown herself off one of the few tall buildings in Ljubljana, but what about the further suffering caused to her parents by a fall from such a height? Apart from the shock of learning that their daughter had died, they would also have to identify a disfigured corpse; no, that was a worse solution than bleeding to death, because it would leave indelible marks on two people who only wanted the best for her.

‘They would get used to their daughter’s death eventually. But it must be impossible to forget a shattered skull.’

Shooting, jumping off a high building, hanging, none of these options suited her feminine nature. Women, when they kill themselves, choose far more romantic methods—like slashing their wrists or taking an overdose of sleeping pills. Abandoned princesses and Hollywood actresses have provided numerous examples of this.

Veronika knew that life was always a matter of waiting for the right moment to act. And so it proved. In response to her complaints that she could no longer sleep at night, two friends of hers managed to get hold of two packs each of a

powerful drug, used by musicians at a local nightclub. Veronika left the four packs on her bedside table for a week, courting approaching death and saying goodbye—entirely unsentimentally—to what people called Life.

Now she was there, glad she had gone all the way, and bored because she didn't know what to do with the little time that remained to her.

She thought again about the absurd question she had just read. How could an article about computers begin with such an idiotic opening line: 'Where is Slovenia?'

Having nothing more interesting to do, she decided to read the whole article and she learned that the said computer game had been made in Slovenia—that strange country that no one seemed quite able to place, except the people who lived there—because it was a cheap source of labour. A few months before,

when the product was launched, the French manufacturer had given a party for journalists from all over the world in a castle in Vled.

Veronika remembered reading something about the party, which had been quite an event in the city, not just because the castle had been redecorated in order to match as closely as possible the medieval atmosphere of the CD-Rom, but because of the controversy in the local press: journalists from Germany, France, Britain, Italy and Spain had been invited, but not a single Slovene.

Homme's correspondent—who was visiting Slovenia for the first time, doubtless with all expenses paid, and determined to spend his visit chatting up other journalists, making supposedly interesting comments and enjoying the free food and drink at the castle—had decided to begin his article with a joke which must have appealed to the sophisticated intellectuals of his country. He had probably told his fellow journalists on the magazine various untrue stories about local customs too, and said how badly Slovene women dress.

That washis problem. Veronika was dying, and she had other concerns, such as wondering if there was life after death, or when her body would be found. Nevertheless—or perhaps precisely because of the important decision she had taken—the article bothered her.

She looked out of the convent window that gave on to the small square in Ljubljana. 'If they don't know where Slovenia is, then Ljubljana must be a myth,' she thought. Like Atlantis or Lemuria, or the other lost continents that fill men's imaginations. No one, anywhere in the world, would begin an article asking where Mount Everest was, even if they had never been there. Yet, in the middle of Europe, a journalist on an important magazine felt no shame at asking such a question, because he knew that most of his readers would not know where Slovenia was, still less its capital, Ljubljana.

It was then that Veronika found a way of passing the time, now that ten

minutes had gone by and she had still not noticed any bodily changes. The final act of her life would be to write a letter to the magazine, explaining that Slovenia was one of the five republics into which the former Yugoslavia had been divided.

The letter would be her suicide note. She would give no explanation of the real reasons for her death. When they found her body, they would conclude that she had killed herself because a magazine did not know where her country was. She laughed to think of the controversy in the newspapers, with some for and some against her suicide committed in honour of her country's cause. And she was shocked by how quickly she could change her mind, since only moments before she had thought exactly the opposite, that the world and other geographical problems were no longer her concern.

She wrote the letter.That moment of good humour almost made her have second thoughts about the need to die, but she had already taken the pills, it was too late to turn back.

Anyway, she had had such moments before and, besides, she was not killing herself because she was a sad, embittered woman, constantly depressed. She had spent many afternoons walking gaily along the streets of Ljubljana or gazing—from the window in her convent room—at the snow falling on the small square with its statue of the poet. Once, for almost a month, she had felt as if she were walking on air, all because a complete stranger, in the middle of that very square, had given her a flower.

She believed herself to be completely normal. Two very simple reasons lay behind her decision to die, and she was sure that, were she to leave a note explaining, many people would agree with her.

The first reason: everything in her life was the same and, once her youth was gone, it would be downhill all the way, with old age beginning to leave irreversible marks, the onset of illness, the departure of friends. She would gain nothing by continuing to live; indeed, the likelihood of suffering only increased.

The second reason was more philosophical: Veronika read the newspapers, watched TV, and she was aware of what was going on in the world. Everything was wrong, and she had no way of putting things right—that gave her a sense of complete powerlessness.

In a short while, though, she would have the final experience of her life, which promised to be very different: death. She wrote the letter to the magazine, then abandoned the topic, and concentrated on more pressing matters, more appropriate to what she was living, or, rather, dying, through at that moment.

She tried to imagine what it would be like to die, but failed to reach any conclusion.

Besides, there was no point worrying about that, for in a few minutes' time

she would know. How many minutes?

She had no idea. But she relished the thought that she was about to find out the answer to the question that everyone asked themselves: does God exist?

Unlike many people, this had not been the great inner debate of her life. Under the old Communist regime, the official line in schools had been that life ended with death and she had got used to the idea.

On the other hand, her parents' generation and her grandparents' generation still went to church, said prayers and went on pilgrimages, and were utterly convinced that God listened to what they said.

At twenty-four, having experienced everything she could experience—and that was no small achievement—Veronika was almost certain that everything ended with death. That is why she had chosen suicide: freedom at last. Eternal oblivion.

In her heart of hearts, though, there was still a doubt: what if God did exist? Thousands of years of civilization had made of suicide a taboo, an affront to all religious codes: man struggles to survive, not to succumb. The human race must procreate. Society needs workers. A couple has to have a reason to stay together, even when love has ceased to exist, and a country needs soldiers, politicians and artists.

'If God exists, and I truly don't believe he does, he will know that there are limits to human understanding. He was the one who created this confusion in which there is poverty, injustice, greed and loneliness. He doubtless had the best of intentions, but the results have proved disastrous; if God exists,

He will be generous with those creatures who chose to leave this Earth early, and he might even apologise for having made us spend time here.'

To hell with taboos and superstitions. Her devout mother would say: God knows the past, the present and the future. In that case, He had placed her in this world in the full knowledge that she would end up killing herself, and He would not be shocked by her actions.

Veronika began to feel a slight nausea, which became rapidly more intense.

In a few moments, she would no longer be able to concentrate on the square outside her window. She knew it was winter, it must have been about four o'clock in the afternoon, and the sun was setting fast. She knew that other people would go on living. At that moment, a young man passed her window and saw her, utterly unaware that she was about to die. A group of Bolivian musicians (where is Bolivia? why don't magazine articles ask that?) were playing in front of the statue of France Pre?eren, the great Slovenian poet, who had made such a profound impact on the soul of his people.

Would she live to hear the end of that music drifting up from the square? It

would be a beautiful memory of this life: the late afternoon, a melody recounting the dreams of a country on the other side of the world,

the warm cosy room, the handsome young man passing by, full of life, who had decided to stop and was now standing looking up at her. She realised that the pills were beginning to take effect and that he was the last person who would see her.

He smiled. She returned his smile—she had nothing to lose. He waved; she decided to pretend she was looking at something else, the young man was going too far. Disconcerted, he continued on his way, forgetting that face at the window for ever.

But Veronika was glad to have felt desired by somebody one last time. She wasn't killing herself because of a lack of love. It wasn't because she felt unloved by her family, or had money problems or an incurable disease.

Veronika had decided to die on that lovely Ljubjlana afternoon, with Bolivian musicians playing in the square, with a young man passing by her window, and she was happy with what her eyes could see and her ears hear. She was even happier that she would not have to go on seeing those same things for another thirty, forty or fifty years, because they would lose all their originality and be transformed into the tragedy of a life in which everything repeats itself and where one day is exactly like another.

Her stomach was beginning to churn now and she was feeling very ill indeed. 'It's odd, I thought an overdose of tranquillizers would send me straight to sleep.' What she was experiencing, though, was a strange buzzing in her ears and a desire to vomit.

'If I throw up, I won't die.'

She decided not to think about the stabbing pains in her stomach and tried to concentrate on the rapidly falling night, on the Bolivians, on the people who were starting to shut up their shops and go home. The noise in her ears was becoming more and more strident and, for the first time since she had taken the pills, Veronika felt fear, a terrible fear of the unknown.

It did not last long. Soon afterwards, she lost consciousness.When she opened her eyes, Veronika did not think 'this must be heaven'. Heaven would never use a fluorescent tube to light a room, and the pain—which started a fraction of a second later—was typical of the Earth. Ah, that Earth pain—unique, unmistakable.Error! Reference source not found.

She tried to move and the pain increased. A series of bright dots appeared, but, even so,Veronika knew that those dots were not the stars of Paradise, but the consequences of the intense pain she was feeling.

'She's coming round,' she heard a woman say. 'You've landed slap bang in

hell, so you’d better make the most of it.’

No, it couldn't be true, that voice was deceiving her. It wasn't hell, because she felt really cold and she was aware of plastic tubes coming out of her nose and mouth. One of the tubes—the one stuck down her throat—made her feel as if she were choking.

She made as if to remove it, but her arms were strapped down.

‘I'm joking, it's not really hell,’ the voice went on. ‘It's worse than hell, not that I’ve ever actually been there. You’re in Villette.’

Despite the pain and the feeling of choking, Veronika realised at once what had happened. She had tried to kill herself and someone had arrived in time to save her. It could have been one of the nuns, a friend who had decided to drop by unannounced, someone delivering something she had forgotten she had ordered. The fact is, she had survived, and she was in Villette.

Villette, the famous and much-feared lunatic asylum, which had been in existence since 1991, the year of the country's independence. At that time, believing that the partitioning of the former Yugoslavia would be achieved through peaceful means (after all, Slovenia had only experienced eleven days of war), a group of European businessmen had obtained permission to set up a hospital for mental patients in an old barracks, abandoned because of high maintenance costs.

Shortly afterwards, however, the wars commenced: first in Croatia, then in Bosnia. The businessmen were worried. The money for the investment came from capitalists scattered all round the globe, from people whose names they didn't even know, so there was no possibility of sitting down in front of them, offering a few excuses and asking them to be patient.They resolved the problem by adopting practices which were far from commendable in a psychiatric hospital, and for the young nation that had just emerged from a benign communism, Villette came to symbolise all the worst aspects of capitalism: to be admitted to the hospital, all you needed was money.

There was no shortage of people who, in their desire to get rid of some family member because of arguments over an inheritance (or over that person’s embarrassing behaviour), were willing to pay large sums of money to obtain a medical report that would allow the internment of their problematic children or parents. Others, fleeing from debts or trying to justify certain attitudes that could otherwise result in long prison sentences, spent a brief time in the asylum and then simply left without paying any penalty or undergoing any judicial process.

Villette was the place from which no one had ever escaped, where genuine madmen—sent there by the courts or by other hospitals—mingled with those merely accused of madness or those pretending to be mad. The result was utter

confusion, and the press were constantly publishing tales of ill-treatment and abuse, although they had never been given permission to visit Villette and actually see what was happening. The government was investigating the complaints, but could get no proof; the shareholders threatened to spread the word that foreign investment was difficult in Slovenia, and so the institution managed to remain afloat, indeed, it went from strength to strength.

‘My aunt killed herself a few months ago,’ the female voice continued. ‘For almost eight years she was too afraid to even leave her room, eating, getting fat, smoking, taking tranquillisers and sleeping most of the time. She had two daughters and a husband who loved her.’

Veronika tried to move her head in the direction of the voice, but failed.

‘I only saw her fight back once, when her husband took a lover. Then she kicked up a fuss, lost a few pounds, smashed some glasses and—for weeks on end—kept the rest of the whole neighbourhood awake with her shouting. Absurd though it may seem, I think that was the happiest time of her life. She was fighting for something, she felt alive and capable of responding to the challenges facing her.’

‘What's all that got to do with me?’ thought Veronika, unable to say anything. ‘I'm not your aunt and I haven't got a husband.’

‘In the end, her husband got rid of his lover,’ said the woman, ‘and gradually, my aunt returned to her former passivity. One day, she phoned to say that she wanted to change her life: she'd given up smoking. That same week, after increasing the number of tranquillisers she was taking because she'd stopped smoking, she told everyone that she wanted to kill herself.

No one believed her. Then, one morning, she left a message on my answerphone, saying goodbye, and she gassed herself. I listened to that message several times: I had never heard her sound so calm, so resigned to her fate. She said she was neither happy nor unhappy, and that was why she couldn't go on.’

Veronika felt sorry for the woman telling the story, for she seemed to be doing so in an attempt to understand her aunt's death. In a world where everyone struggles to survive whatever the cost, how could one judge those people who decide to die?

No one can judge. Each person knows the extent of their own suffering, or the total absence of meaning in their lives. Veronika wanted to explain that, but instead she choked on the tube in her mouth and the woman hurried to her aid.

She saw the woman bending over her bound body, which was full of tubes and protected against her will, her freely expressed desire to destroy it. She moved her head from side to side, pleading with her eyes for them to remove the tubes and let her die in peace.

‘You're upset,’ said the woman. ‘I don't know if you're sorry for what you did or if you still want to die;

that doesn't interest me. What interests me is doing my job. If the patient gets agitated, the regulations say I must give them a sedative.’

Veronika stopped struggling, but the nurse was already injecting something into her arm. Soon afterwards, she was back in a strange dreamless world, where the only thing she could remember was the face of the woman she had just seen: green eyes, brown hair, and a very distant air, the air of someone doing things because she has to do them, never questioning why the rules say this or that.

Paulo Coelho heard about Veronika's story three months later when he was having supper in an Algerian restaurant in Paris with a Slovenian friend, also called Veronika, who happened to be the daughter of the doctor in charge at Villette.

Later, when he decided to write a book about the subject, he considered changing his friend's name in order not to confuse the reader. He thought of calling her Blaska or Edwina or Marietzja, or some other Slovenian name, but he ended up keeping the real names. When he referred to his friend Veronika, he would call her his friend, Veronika. When he referred to the other Veronika, there would be no need to describe her at all, because she would be the central character in the book, and people would get irritated if they were always having to read ‘Veronika the mad woman,’ or ‘Veronika the one who tried to commit suicide’. Besides, both he and his friend Veronika would only take up a very brief part of the book, this part.

His friend Veronika was horrified at what her father had done, especially bearing in mind that he was the director of an institution seeking respectability and was himself working on a thesis that would be judged by the conventional academic community.

‘Do you know where the word “asylum” comes from?’ she was saying. ‘It dates back to the Middle Ages, from a person’s right to seek refuge in churches and other holy places. The right of asylum is something any civilised person can understand. So how could my father, the director of an asylum, treat someone like that?’

Paulo Coelho wanted to know all the details of what had happened, because he had a genuine reason for finding out about Veronika's story.

The reason was the following: he himself had been admitted into an asylum or, rather, mental hospital as they were better known. And this had happened not once, but three times, in 1965, 1966 and 1967. The place where he had been interned was the Dr Eiras Sanatorium in Rio de Janeiro.

Precisely why he had been admitted into hospital was something which, even

today, he found odd;

perhaps his parents were confused by his unusual behaviour, half-shy, half-extrovert, and by his desire to be an ‘artist’, something that everyone in the family considered a perfect recipe for ending up as a social outcast and dying in poverty.

When he thought about it—and, it must be said, he rarely did—he considered the real madman to have been the doctor who had agreed to admit him for the flimsiest of reasons (as in any family, the tendency is always to place the blame on others, and to state adamantly that the parents didn't know what they were doing when they took that drastic decision).

Paulo laughed when he learned of the strange letter to the newspapers that Veronika had left behind, complaining that an important French magazine didn't even know where Slovenia was.

‘No one would kill themselves over something like that.’

‘That's why the letter had no effect,’ said his friend Veronika, embarrassed. ‘Yesterday, when I checked in at the hotel, the receptionist thought Slovenia was a town in Germany.’

He knew the feeling, for many foreigners believed the Argentine city of Buenos Aires to be the capital of Brazil.

But apart from having foreigners blithely compliment him on the beauty of his country’s capital city (which was to be found in the neighbouring country of Argentina), Paulo Coelho shared with Veronika the fact just mentioned, but which is worth restating: he too had been admitted into a mental hospital, and,

as his first wife had once remarked, ‘should never have been let out’.

But he was let out. And when he left the sanatorium for the last time, determined never to go back, he had made two promises: (a) that he would one day write about the subject and (b) that he would wait until both his parents were dead before touching publicly on the issue, because he didn't want to hurt them, since both had spent many years of their lives blaming themselves for what they had done.

His mother had died in 1993, but his father, who had turned eighty-four in 1997, was still alive and in full possession of his mental faculties and his health, despite having emphysema of the lungs (even though he'd never smoked) and despite living entirely off frozen food because he couldn't get a housekeeper who could put up with his eccentricities.

So, when Paulo Coelho heard Veronika's story, he discovered a way of talking about the issue without breaking his promises. Even though he had never considered suicide, he had an intimate knowledge of the world of the mental hospital—the treatments, the relationships between doctors and patients, the

comforts and anxieties of living in a place like that.

So let us allow Paulo Coelho and his friend Veronika to leave this book for good and let us get on with the story.

Veronika didn't know how long she had slept. She remembered waking up at one point—still with the life-giving tubes in her mouth and nose—and hearing a voice say:

‘Do you want me to masturbate you?’

But now, looking round the room with her eyes wide open, she didn't know if that had been real or an hallucination. Apart from that one memory, she could remember nothing, absolutely nothing.

The tubes had been taken out, but she still had needles stuck all over her body, wires connected to the area around her heart and her head, and her arms were still strapped down. She was naked, covered only by a sheet, and she felt cold, but she was determined not to complain.The small area surrounded by green curtains was filled by the bed she was lying on, the machinery of the Intensive Care Unit and a white chair on which a nurse was sitting reading a book.

This time, the woman had dark eyes and brown hair. Even so, Veronika was not sure if it was the same person she had talked to hours—or was it days?—ago.

‘Can you unstrap my arms?’

The nurse looked up, said a brusque ‘No’, and went back to her book.

I'm alive, thought Veronika. Everything's going to start all over again. I'll have to stay in here for a while, until they realise that I’m perfectly normal. Then they'll let me out, and I'll see the streets of Ljubljana again, its main square, the bridges, the people going to and from work.

Since people always tend to help others—just so that they can feel they are better than they really are—they'll give me my job back at the library. In time, I'll start frequenting the same bars and nightclubs,

I'll talk to my friends about the injustices and problems of the world, I'll go to the cinema, take walks around the lake.

Since I only took sleeping pills, I'm not disfigured in any way: I'm still young, pretty, intelligent, I won't have any difficulty in getting boyfriends, I never did. I'll make love with them in their houses, or in the woods, I'll feel a certain degree of pleasure, but the moment I reach orgasm, the feeling of emptiness will return. We won't have much to talk about, and both he and I will know it. The time will come to make our excuses—‘It's late’, or ‘I have to get up early tomorrow’—and we'll part as quickly as possible, avoiding looking each other in the eye.

I'll go back to my rented room in the convent. I'll try and read a book, turn on

the TV to see the same old programmes, set the alarm clock to wake up at exactly the same time I woke up the day before and mechanically repeat my tasks at the library. I'll eat a sandwich in the park opposite the theatre, sitting on the same bench, along with other people who also choose the same benches on which to sit and have their lunch, people who all have the same vacant look, but pretend to be pondering extremely important matters.

Then I'll go back to work, I'll listen to the gossip about who's going out with whom, who's suffering from what, how such and such a person was in tears about her husband, and I'll be left with the feeling that I'm privileged: I'm pretty, I have a job, I can have any boyfriend I choose. So I'll go back to the bars at the end of the day, and the whole thing will start again.

My mother, who must be out of her mind with worry over my suicide attempt, will recover from the shock and will keep asking me what I'm going to do with my life, why I'm not the same as everyone else, things really aren't as complicated as I think they are. 'Look at me, for example, I've been married to your father for years, and I've tried to give you the best possible upbringing and set you the best possible example.'

One day, I'll get tired of hearing her constantly repeating the same things, and to please her I'll marry a man whom I oblige myself to love. He and I will end up finding a way of dreaming of a future together: a house in the country, children, our children's future. We'll make love often in the first year, less in the second, and after the third year, people perhaps think about sex only once a fortnight and transform that thought into action only once a month. Even worse, we'll barely talk. I'll force myself to accept the situation, and I'll wonder what's wrong with me, because he no longer takes any interest in me, ignores me, and does nothing but talk about his friends, as if they were his real world.

When the marriage is just about to fall apart, I'll get pregnant. We'll have a child, feel closer to each other for a while, and then the situation will go back to what it was before.

I'll begin to put on weight like the aunt that nurse was talking about yesterday—or was it days ago, I don't really know. And I'll start to go on diets, systematically defeated each day, each week, by the weight that keeps creeping up regardless of the controls I put on it. At that point, I'll take those magic pills that stop you feeling depressed, then I'll have a few more children, conceived during nights of love that pass all too quickly. I'll tell everyone that the children are my reason for living, when in reality my life is their reason for living.

People will always consider us a happy couple, and no one will know how much solitude, bitterness and resignation lies beneath the surface happiness.

Until one day, when my husband takes a lover for the first time, and I will

perhaps kick up a fuss like the nurse's aunt, or think again of killing myself. By then, though, I'll be too old and cowardly, with two or three children who need my help, and I'll have to bring them up and help them find a place in the world before I can just abandon everything. I won't commit suicide: I'll make a scene, I'll threaten to leave and take the children with me. Like all men, my husband will back down, he'll tell me he loves me and that it won't happen again. It won't even occur to him that, if I really did decide to leave, my only option would be to go back to my parents' house and stay there for the rest of my life, forced to listen to my mother going on and on all day about how I lost my one opportunity for being happy, that he was a wonderful husband despite his peccadillos, that my children will be traumatised by the separation.

Two or three years later, another woman will appear in his life. I'll find out—because I saw them, or because someone told me—but this time I'll pretend I don't know. I used up all my energy fighting against that other lover, I've no energy left, it's best to accept life as it really is, and not as I imagined it to be. My mother was right.

He will continue being a considerate husband, I will continue working at the library, eating my sandwiches in the square opposite the theatre, reading books I never quite manage to finish, watching television programmes that are the same as they were ten, twenty, fifty years ago.

Except that I'll eat my sandwiches with a sense of guilt, because I'm getting fatter; and I won't go to bars any more, because I have a husband expecting me to come home and look after the children.

After that, it's a matter of waiting for the children to grow up and of spending all day thinking about suicide, without the courage to do anything about it. One fine day, I'll reach the conclusion that that's what life is like, there's no point worrying about it, nothing will change. And I'll accept it.

Veronika brought her interior monologue to a close and made a promise to herself: she would not leave Villette alive. It was best to put an end to everything now, while she was still brave and healthy enough to die.